

Lister Sinclair

Good evening and welcome to Ideas. I'm Lister Sinclair with Part 4 of The Education Debates, David Cayley's continuing exploration of issues currently facing schools and universities. In tonight's program you'll hear from two American educators who have found inspired solutions to some of the same problems facing Canadian schools. We'll start with teacher Deborah Meier's description of Central Park East, a school that began an educational renaissance in New York City's East Harlem district. Then we'll talk to Ted Seiser, a former Dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, about his plan to redesign the American high school. The Education Debates, Part 4, by David Cayley.

David Cayley

East Harlem, sometimes called Spanish Harlem, comprises District Four of the New York City school system. In 1974, it ranked last academically among the city's 32 districts. That same year, a new superintendent was appointed in District Four. His name was Tony Alvarado and he had an idea about how to improve the district's schools. Instead of attacking the defeated and demoralized culture of the existing schools head-on, he proposed to create small new schools and to try to draw standards and expectations up through them. The first of these so-called "schools of choice", Central Park East, opened with less than a hundred students in awing of an existing school in the fall of 1974. Thus began a story that would inspire new hope for New York's schools and become one of the seeds of a movement to change schooling throughout the United States. The teacher whom Alvarado asked to create this school was Deborah Meier. She was a native New Yorker who had taught in the public schools of Chicago and New York and was particularly interested in bringing progressive educational methods into the public schools. The progressive movement in education had tried to make the classroom a vivid, democratic community in which students are active and engaged participants. In New York, before the 70s, its influence had generally been restricted to private schools. Meier, who had come from such a private school background herself, thought that lively schooling was suitable for all students and not just the upper middle class. When Alvarado approached her, she was already involved in setting up a program called Open Corridors in the Harlem school where she was then teaching. The idea was to foster critical public conversation amongst teachers about what they were doing. She brought this idea with her and made a continuing and consequential conversation amongst the staff one of the cornerstones of the new school at Central Park East.

Deborah Meier

We talked an enormous amount. We shared articles. There's always someone, particularly (unclear) always found some marvellous article that we all really had to read and talk about together. There was a lot of reading together and a lot of talking together and a lot of arguing and a lot of strong views. A lot of visiting each other's classrooms. A lot of visiting other schools. We had a very ... a very strong internal cultural life among the staff. We took ... we went away together a lot. We'd spend three or four days before the school year started somewhere together. And three or four days in mid-year somewhere together. So it ... the school was always kind of into something as a unit. Occasionally the whole school would teach the same thing the same time. When the Tutankhamen exhibit was in New York City, the entire school studied ancient Egypt. And we had a marvellous time doing it. And of course it stayed small. That, I think, was important. We didn't, as many good schools do, keep getting bigger as we got more popular. So that the size of the staff enabled conversation to take place pretty easily.

David Cayley

A second feature of the school was a negotiable curriculum, one that could bend to meet the interests of the students, the aptitudes of the teachers or current happenings, like the visit of the King Tutankhamen exhibition to New York. The central idea was to seize the immediately given as it arose in the thoughts and experiences of the children and in the environment of the school.

Deborah Meier

In the natural course of kids' lives, they were important and powerful subject matter and the important question was did kids know how to think about that stuff, did they know how to put it together, organize it, sort it out, do additional research on it, ask good questions about it, figure out how to answer good ... the questions that arose, present it to others, hear other evidence, hear another viewpoint about the same material and so forth (unclear) we later on in the secondary school came to call the habits of minds were the critical questions (unclear) you had to study something. You can't learn things without studying something, but what the something was was far of less importance than how you (unclear). We had one teacher in the school, one of the greatest teachers I'll ever know who every year in the spring studies kites. Now, are kites in themselves an important intellectual topic? I would be very hard-pressed to justify it but there was a most extraordinary flurry of creative intellectual activity went on in that room during the six weeks in which these kids produced the most extraordinary kites every year. Went out to Central Park and flew them and did all kinds of other study of space and wind and different kinds of angles and construction. But one time came to me and said, "Do you disapprove of the fact that I always study the same thing over and over again?" And I said, "No, because actually I think it's why you're such a terrific observer of kids. You have a repertoire of this material so well that you're fascinated by how different kids (unclear). It's never the same, year after year." But what's different is what different kids are making of it and precisely because (unclear) knew the material so well. She was focussing on how the kids responded to the material.

David Cayley

A third important feature of Central Park East was the school's determination to keep in touch with the families of its students. When David Bentsman, an education professor at Rutgers, interviewed the first graduates and their families ten years later, he found that the school had often changed the lives of the parents as much as the lives of the students. The combination of parental involvement, a staff engaged in continuous critical reflection and a lively, responsive academic curriculum built a school that was soon swamped with applications. Meier and her staff were opposed to the school getting too big, believing that a school can remain a community only up to a certain scale. So they crated new schools. In 1980, an annex opened in another public school a few blocks south and then a few years later a third school. By 1984, Central Park East was a family of three elementary schools of 250 each. Their graduates were enjoying outstanding academic success. Of the first seven graduating classes, 96% finished high school--the city average is 50%--and two-thirds went on to college. The next step was the creation of a high school, starting in 1985. The requirements for graduation, Meier and her colleagues decided, would not be the accumulation of credits or the amassing of seat time, as it's sometimes cynically called, but what they called "exhibitions" in which students would be asked to give a public demonstration of intellectual mastery.

Deborah Meier

We, from the beginning, agreed that we were going to graduate kids entirely by some system of presentation, more or less a Ph.D thesis. Students would have to demonstrate to us that they were entitled to a Central Park East Secondary School diploma. We had a graduation committee. It's the same graduation committee that watches all of your work. We may add a person to the

graduation committee for a particular area because there's no one who feels competent to make certain kinds of judgements in that area. But this graduation committee, at the end, said to the faculty as a whole this student has, over the last two years, demonstrated to us through these meetings of this committee the kind of work that we believe entitles them to a diploma. And that's true for all kids, but the kind of work they present can vary. There are some agreements. It has to include written work, it has to include some visual presentations, it has to include oral defence of your work. You have to present it in ways that show mathematical competence and the capacity to do historical thinking. And I mean, we have broken it down in all these ways. We even have a rubric we all agree on that's a scoring system. But nevertheless, a student can argue with us about the scoring system. You can retake it if you can appeal to others that you don't agree with the judgement and it is a judgement call and we not only don't deny (unclear) judgement call but we make a big point about the fact that what we're training ourselves to do is to make good public judgements about the work of our students and our own work. We bring in outside people to look at the judgements we've made. And while those outside judgements don't change the students' scores, they are, in a way, a check on us and our conversations remaining a public conversation, the judgements we made are accessible to other people to argue with.

David Cayley

These graduation committees, it's important to say, also include student members. One is judged by peers as well as teachers. The emphasis, in both the granting and the gaining of a diploma, is on judicious habits of mind, open to critical public scrutiny. The most important of these habits of mind, Meier and the other teachers came to feel, were the ability to assess and provide evidence, to appreciate points of view and why people hold them, to follow chains of cause and effect, to hypothesize and, finally, to be able to answer the question, who cares, what difference does it make.

In Meier's mind, this last was always the critical question. Their students succeeded at academic work. A remarkable 90% of the first two graduating classes went on to college. But the reason, she thinks, was that the work never felt in the bad sense, "academic".

Deborah Meier

The thing that makes that school, I think, powerful for kids and is the same thing that makes it powerful for grown-ups, there are lots of very strong relationships being built in that school, across generations and across natural barriers of race, class and that they are genuinely personal relationships but they are built around important purposes. So I don't know to put this exactly, but it's the notion of work, that it is a place of work, and some people, when you talk about school to work connection, well, there's an aspect of where we talk about school to work connections in the latest jargon as though school were not a place of work. And a good school is a good place of work and it's a good place of work which means there are also relationships between people around purposes, things they are trying to accomplish together. And I think that our schools feel that. I mean, I think when you walk around them, they have a sense that these are people who are engaged in common work together and some shared purposes, and that regardless of their age they see themselves as colleagues. I think people feel that they are members of a common club and engaged in a joint enterprise. I think that's critical to learning. A good school should be a place in which we all see ourselves as belonging to the common club, can imagine ourselves taking each other's place, being in each other's shoes and therefore are continuously learning from each other. And have some control over who we choose to identify and learn from. We haven't ... haven't squeezed ourselves into a very small ... one place but we're wide open to many possibilities. (Unclear) the average adolescent in this country has no relationship with anybody who is much different than themselves. I mean, they live in an enormously small world and can't imagine belonging to the many other worlds

that surround them. 'Cause for most kids, when they go to high school, they go actually to quite a small school, even if they're in a 3,000-person high school, they're actually going to one of only 70 kids, but there are no grown-ups in their little community. And I think the Central Park East School and in other schools like it that that's one of the central characteristics that's different is that the grown-ups and the kids belong to the same school. They don't just happen to bump into each other in classes and go to their separate worlds. They really are part of the same community. I think that's a critical part of why the school's powerful and it's ... how everything is organized. And I think it's part of all the ways we've organized everything, that people are expected to take responsibility for this community. They're making judgements. They're rethinking their positions. They're arguing about them. So that it is, in a sense, a responsible democratic community, not strictly in the sense of whether we vote on things or not, but it's a responsible democratic community in the sense that we all open and public about how we arrive at decisions and open to changing our mind about our decision.

David Cayley

In her book, 'The Power of Their Ideas', Deborah Meier imagines some Martian trying to make out the purpose of education in New York City. The visitor reasons that since all the children are engaged in academic curricula, it must be that they are all being prepared for a life of academic scholarship. But of course they aren't, and they know it and that's why, in Meier's view, education often fails. "Stay in school" is repeated endlessly, like some magical incantation, but the purpose, aside from the alleged value of the diploma in the job market, is never really made clear. The Central Park East Schools addressed the question of purpose, not just academically, but in the day to day life of the school. The curriculum, the consequences of misbehaviour, the requirements for graduation all were subject to continuous revision in the light of a continuing discussion of purposes. In this respect, Meier and her colleagues recovered an aspect of the progressive tradition that had sometimes been eclipsed by a too exclusive emphasis on the needs of the child. They brought to the fore the idea that the school is a democratic community and that disciplined, critical habits of mind are what allow it to function as such. Central Park East Secondary School gave its students the sense of a community worth belonging to and worth sacrificing for, something Meier thinks has been increasingly absent in the lives of American adolescents.

Deborah Meier

Post World War II is the first generation of adolescents in the history of the world that were expected to be irresponsible. Young people who ... historically would have been expected to go to work were (unclear) from adults with more money for self-indulgent practices than they are likely ever to have in their lives. And (unclear) incentive, then, for growing up. There were many models of why it was wonderful to be grown-up. So that we really have sort of institutionalized, have just before you become a grown-up you're your most alienated and irresponsible subculture anyone could imagine creating. And then we have created schools, because the large anonymous high schools became the norm in American life just about the same period. So we created this institution of the American high school which also isolated kids from adults. It's an amazing thing that we did to ourselves, and then, of course, we complain about it. And of course, I think we're also very angry at adolescents because they have this freedom and irresponsibility which the rest of us don't have. So rather than adolescents being the staging ground for a freer and more luxurious adulthood, which I think traditionally adolescence was the hardest time and then you were going to become a grown-up. You could do what you wanted. But in our ... we've created a society in which in adolescence you can do what you want and we're mad at those kids. So I think all this talk lately about rigour and toughness and expel them and ... let's make exams harder and harder, there's no discussion about

whether the harder is better. The word 'rigour' and 'hard' is now have a definition of themselves and as they should be tough. And I think in some ways it's our anger at the lack of toughness, authentic toughness, of ... that we created for adolescence. So I'm not saying it's easy to be an adolescent in America. I think it's very hard. But it is hard for the wrong reasons.

David Cayley

In Meier's view, the current move to increase academic rigour in schools is often a covert expression of nostalgia or resentment against adolescence. She also sees it as a danger to democracy. In place of a dialogue about the purpose of education and a recognition of the variety of possible accounts of this purpose, a smokescreen of numbers and rank orderings is created. This pretended objectivity, Meier says, represents a retreat from the negotiated judgements on which the vitality of democratic life depends.

Deborah Meier

We need an alternative way to think about how we hold each other accountable and I think in a democratic society you don't hold each other accountable by developing so-called objective measures but in the same way the jury system is a good model for thinking about how we hold people accountable for law and order and we ought to think about that in schools. We should be developing juries of our peers who judge schools and use a much wider range that ... of evidence that schools need to present and can argue the case and that we can say well this means this, this means that. When you look at all these report cards and all these attempts to rank schools, if the more you know about the schools involved, the more you realize that these categories are missing the whole point. And you want to discuss it with someone but you don't (unclear) that the reason they could ... that this is lower than this is because our students leave in tenth grade or because we take in a lot of eleventh graders or ... there are ... realities behind these numbers that are totally lost when you try to develop any objective monitoring system. And democratic life assumes there is two possible explanations for this. Three po .. really. That there are potentials. You want to hear people's rationales. You want to hear their argument. You want to hear why they chose this way and rather than this way. They've got two good answers. (Unclear) different ... we can all agree that you should ... these are important things, but we can disagree about which are the priorities and which trade-offs we're willing to make. And not all of that nuance is lost in the kind of ways in which we're trying to judge schools. And at a time we need more debate in American life, more face-to-face confrontation and conversation and recreate a strong democratic base. I think we're undercutting it with these efforts to have national tests, national curriculums, national monitoring systems, national scoring systems, national report cards. It'll get thinner and thinner, the data gets thinner and thinner and less and less real.

David Cayley

Deborah Meier left the Central Park East Schools a few years ago after 20 years as Director. When she began, District Four had 22 schools in 22 buildings. When she left, there were 51 schools in 20 buildings and the idea of schools of choice had spread throughout the rest of the city as well. Many states now also allow charter schools, a further expansion of public school choice. A charter school is a public school with an independent charter that frees it from the regulation of its local school district. Meier continues to believe that choice is an indispensable element in school reform, but today she holds this view in a qualified and sometimes agonized way. She's no better friend to educational bureaucracy than she ever was. She recalls the board official who insisted on knowing the school's bell schedule and wouldn't be put off until she invented one. But she also fears the glorification of the free market in educational services. Choice, she recognizes, can easily turn into

the pursuit of private advantage. She seeks the middle way and believes it can be found only by attending to the civic purpose of education.

Deborah Meier

What I think we're paying too little attention to is the messages that our kinds of schooling (unclear) kids about collective purposes, that we need to continuously examine whether public chartering is ... is part of a turn towards ... everybody out for themselves or is a wider way of looking at a community. It could be either. But what kind of public policy could make charters a vehicle for democratic life rather than a vehicle for running away from democratic life? I think it's what we need to keep our eye on. And the same is true about regular public schools. I mean, the geographic neighbourhood school can be a way of isolating us from our fellow citizens or it can be a way of creating strong communities. In that sense, these labels sometimes hide what's really happening in (unclear) the same way the (unclear) report card labels, you know, standards in schools and so forth hide more, so does even the labels charter, public school, neighbourhood school, school of choice are hiding. Some schools of choice, I think, are simply vehicles for creating class segregation within cities and ... enable people to go to private schools with public subsidy. And yet I think providing choice is very important because you won't have interesting schools if we have to pretend they're all alike.

David Cayley

Deborah Meier is now directing a new elementary school in a poor district of Boston. It's called a pilot school, which is Boston's version of New York's schools of choice. The interview you're hearing was recorded in Boston last year during the period in which she was setting the school up. She concluded our conversation by saying that what worries her most in current American talk about school reform is a feeling of recklessness. Finding the line between choice as an expression of community and choice as repudiation, as she said a moment ago, will require a tentative, nuanced and continuously revised public policy. But what she's hearing from policy-makers instead is an unnerving arrogance.

Deborah Meier

There's a lack of thoughtfulness right now about the long-range consequences of some of the reforms being proposed. But I wouldn't worry about them if I thought we were (unclear), if I thought, well, we're going to take this but we're going to watch very carefully. But these are all being done without much thoughtfulness. Even the people who are pushing the national exams and the high-stakes testing and so on are filled with that kind ofchutzpah--I know what's right, I'm sure what world-class citizenship means and therefore I have the right to impose it upon everybody else. There's a kind of lack of humility about it that just stuns me. There's not much we (unclear) thinking about what are the risks, what do we have to do to modify some of those risks, where might this lead if carried out? And I think that's a real palpable danger to them (unclear) society. So it scares me.

I'm sometimes feeling more scared than I am other times. One reason I think I want so much to go back to school full-time and immerse myself inside one school is I worry a little less about what the large picture is and spend a little more of my time with the small picture.

(Music)

David Cayley

The schools that blossomed under the hands of Deborah Meier and her colleagues at Central Park East are part of a wider movement in American education called the Coalition of Essential Schools.

Its chairman and founder is Ted Seiser. Seiser began his career as a school teacher, then went on to become a professor of education and eventually Dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education during the 1960s. At the beginning of the 70s, he left the university world to become head master of a large, elite boys' private school, the Philips Andover Academy. Towards the end of his nine years there, he began to wonder why do we do what we do in education. This led him, along with several other scholars, into a large-scale research project on the American high school. It involved careful observation of 15 public and four private high schools over an 18-month period, as well as the publication of several books, including his own 'Horace's Compromise', and it led eventually to the founding in 1984 of the Coalition of Essential Schools. One of the main findings of their research effort was that the typical American high school has become what Seiser and his colleagues called "the shopping mall" high school, less an educational institution, he says, than a miscellany of misdirected social concern.

Ted Seiser

The high schools are asked to solve all of society's ills. High schools are essentially a mirror of American society when it feels bad. Any time there's a problem, we add a course. And if you're worried about disabled children, we expect the schools to step in. If we worry about poverty, if we worry about competition with the Russians, the schools are supposed to be part of the weaponry. And what has evolved are high schools with these groaning menus of obligations far in excess of what they can conceivably address, with the result that most of what we try to do we do very superficially.

David Cayley

This curricular overload, Seiser says, is just one of the obstacles to serious education in high schools. Another is the importance of the high school as a rite of passage.

Ted Seiser

In the United States, high school is one of the great rituals of growing up. We're the only country, or almost the only country, which has these elaborate graduate ceremonies where all the public school children dress up like monks in caps and gowns and parade across the stages. High school graduation meant it was all right to get married. High school graduation meant it was okay to do all kinds of things. That is, it had ritual meaning and it took place between the ages of 17 and 18. And graduation is almost a kind of secular bar mitzphah in this country and you don't mess with that easily. You don't say to a child, "You graduate when you show me you can do some things," because that might mean that she won't graduate between the ages of 17 and 18. The social side of high school became intensely important and one of the fascinating things about American high schools is how common those rituals are, even though schools are widely dispersed in different parts of the country and under the direction of separate school boards. Homecoming, Thanksgiving Day football, the junior prom, cheerleaders--these rituals are ubiquitous. And because they have social meaning. You don't mess with that. You don't mess with that. Furthermore, until recent times, you didn't have to work very hard in high school and still look forward to a career where you could earn a good salary. A persistence and a strong back and modest academic attainments meant you could do very well, thank you. And so we didn't need to go beyond the rituals. That was enough, you know. As late as the 1950s, a Harvard president said, about 20% really should aspire to serious intellectual work and the rest should be given respectful intellectual but, shall we say, guardedly limited education. And what we're seeing is now is strong backs and persistence and modest intellectual attainments will not mean that you can make it in this society. And that is one of a number of reasons where our political leadership is saying, you know, we can't have this merely as a

social ritual any more. There's much more at stake here. And that serious and flexible minds must be something everybody has, not just 20%.

David Cayley

Alongside these essentially social impediments to education, Seiser sees a central pedagogical difficulty. Ever since compulsory public education achieved its now canonical form, around the beginning of this century, school has been rigidly defined as a lock-step progress along a graded curriculum through which one advances as much by age as by achievement. This universal mechanism, Seiser believes, is seriously at odds with the diversity of children and the variety of learning styles.

Ted Seiser

We're still stuck in the early 20th century notion that all children are roughly alike and they all learn roughly in the same way and that the proper metaphor for that learning is we teachers delivering services into the heads of those kids. And so we march them through a common curriculum with a common pedagogy, within a common assessment system. We grade them by their chronological ages and we think we've done our job if we've merely told the children things. No, all of those assumptions are wrong. Children learn in profoundly and interestingly different ways. Their development intellectually is as mysterious and varied as their development physically. Being told things, a day full of sermons yields very thin gruel. People learn and remember when they do things. And when they use things and when they see things in context. And so our projects now focus very much on taking account of the different ways that children learn, take account of the different contexts in which they grow up and insist that they are engaged and they're not just sitting there passively writing down on their slates what we tell them.

David Cayley

What Seiser calls "our projects" are the schools that have addressed the difficulties he's been talking about and now comprise the Coalition of Essential Schools. When I met with him last year, more than 200 schools were full partners in the Coalition, with 790 in the planning or exploring stage. When he began in 1984, there were only a handful, including the Central Park East Schools. These schools, he says, acknowledged some simple common principles but they also recognized that no two good schools are ever alike.

Ted Seiser

What makes a good high school, we felt from our research, was a very sensitive relationship with its own immediate community and that good high schools were led by authoritative faculty and authoritative faculty had the power and the obligation to craft their school in ways which were respectful of the best aspects of their own community. Which is to say a very, very good school in inner city New York might look very, very different from a very, very good school in suburban Pittsburgh or rural Nebraska. So we didn't have a model. We didn't say, okay, there are seven steps to heaven and we'll teach you the seven. We said, no, you've got to design the steps in ways that make sense with your own setting, and furthermore, you must take authority, you must hold yourselves accountable, you must do it. Now, in front of that assumption were some simple ideas, very old-fashioned ideas which we call common principles which in our research we found often were honoured only in the breach or totally ignored. They're very simple. You know, no two kids are like, so a good school has to take them one by one. You have to personalize schooling. If you do that, the teachers have to know the kids, each one. So you can't run a high school, as is typical in this country, where teachers have anywhere from 100 to 200 children to get to know, coming at them

in groups of 25 to 40. So we said to them you have to start with the assumption that these kids, bless them, are different and unless you know how they're different you can't teach them well. So you have to rearrange the school so that no teacher has more than 80 kids. Another one--you don't graduate until you exhibit. Which means the faculty have to be clear on what the youngster shows it. That is, you have to cast a curriculum in terms of what a kid can do. That's radically different. The way we usually describe curriculums is as lists of things. You could go to Algebra 1, Algebra 2.

But when you say, okay, when it's all done, what can a youngster do, what kinds of questions can you pose a youngster that you expect him to be able to answer and defend publicly? So that turns the curriculum on its head. You start backwards. You say what is it, what does the child look like, what can the child do and on the basis of that and assuming that no two of them are quite alike, how do we plan backwards? So these are very ... I mean, these are a couple of ideas. They're very simple. They're very uncontroversial. They're old as the hills. But if you take them seriously, they involve a revolution. And our assumption is that the revolution will take place within roughly the existing budgets of schools. So we found first five and then twelve places where principals and teachers and school boards said, yeah, I think we can do this. And we also think we have the political running room to pull it off. And the twelve went to 20 and the 20 went to 45 and the majority failed at it. That is, they never did get the running room when it became quite clear the tough decisions that had to be made, that is, instead of doing 35 things we'll do six things. And we'll do them well. And so it's gone from there. And there are now over 1,000 schools, at one stage or another, struggling with it. And the numbers grow very rapidly.

David Cayley

Let me propose some of the other principles and ask for your commentary. You've talked a little bit about the size and you've talked a little bit about the principle of less is more. The role of the teacher.

Ted Seiser

If any one of us learns by engaging with ideas, doing things, if you will, thinking hard about them, then the teacher becomes a provoker and a coach, rather than a teller. You don't really learn how to do something 'til you have to use it. And you really know you know it when you use it in what at first blush appears to be an unfamiliar situation. So what teachers have to do is constantly push good questions in front of kids. Yes, and now and then tell them things or tell them where to find things out. But basically the kids have to do the work. If they don't do the work, they're not going to learn it any more than we adults learn things when we don't do them. I mean, how many of us know how to run our Macintosh computers by reading the manual? We don't. We put the manual aside and we start playing with it. Same thing for the kid in mathematics. That profoundly changes the role of the teacher. Now, as soon as you, as a teacher, say, okay, the kids have to do the work, the differences between the kids immediately leap forward. If I'm doing all the lecturing, as I did in my early years as a teacher, didn't make a difference if the kids learned differently because I never knew. I'd just sit down, I'll tell you. This is a quadratic formula. Learn it. If I say, now, here's a problem, then, you know, Johnny will tackle a problem one way and Suzie will tackle a problem another way. And they may be appropriate ways for those kids. Billy, on the other hand, will approach it a third way, which is in the wrong direction. So I had to attend to each one individually. So teachers become more like very good editors of books or very good athletic coaches. They are sources of information. They are people who push, demand, harass, provoke, support, but they're not just preachers.

David Cayley

And what about their authority?

Ted Seiser

It's fundamental. I mean, nobody knows how to proceed with my history class better than I do because I know those kids. The wisest person who doesn't know those kids can't tell me about the pace and substance, in toto, of the history course. The wise person can say, well, let's do ... let's head in this general direction. But unless I have the authority, as the teacher who knows those kids, to say okay, we're hitting the brakes now because it's perfectly clear to me that most of you don't get what we're talking about, which means that I'm not on the, as they say, the same page as the teacher next door. Because his kids are different from my kids. The most important decisions in schools are made by the people at the bottom of the typical pyramid. They are the decisions of the questions and the pressure and the encouragement pushed on an individual kid by an individual adult and unless that adult has power and authority and obligation and responsibility, nothing happens with many kids.

David Cayley

That requires a revolution in public school governance, no?

Ted Seiser

Absolutely. That's why so many of us have been involved in getting running room from local school boards, setting up alternative schools, charter schools, pilot schools, conspiring with superintendents to ... and with union leaders to do X, even though the contract says Y. Because everybody knows X is sensible, but we don't want to fight about Y. So just don't tell me what you're doing, but do it, please. There is loving insubordination all across the system.

David Cayley

Expectations.

Ted Seiser

Well, there was a very old friend of mine who was a very good teacher of German and I watched him in the first day of a ten-week intensive, full-time German language course he taught to high school kids. And he walked in the classroom, started speaking auf Deutsch. Of course, the kids looked at him as though he was ... they didn't know what he was doing. And he kept talking. He was a wonderful actor, a ham. He started acting things out. And he got them to talk a little bit and talk a little bit. And they were all embarrassed and so forth. He kept on and on and on and he finally shifted in English and said, okay, you're going to learn 100 words a day, new words a day. They were in a catatonic trance. A hundred words a day? And the fact of the matter is they got over 100 words a day. Now, what John Chivers did is set the sights very high, but in a friendly way. And said we're going to do it, you know. Hang on, this is a roller coaster. We're going to do it. You're not going to speak English anywhere, ever. You're just going to speak German. That's high expectations. That is saying to the kids, you can do it, you can do it. And people ... people rise, if they see the reason for rising, if they're properly led, and if they get the feedback that, in fact, they can do some things.

David Cayley

The Coalition of Essential Schools straddles what is often taken as the great divide in education, the supposed opposition between romantic, progressive, child-centred schooling and rigorous, curriculum-centred, academically-focussed schooling. Seiser's views make a hash of this simple but

prevalent dichotomy. He wants education that is both demanding and realistic about the differences between children. His view of testing, I think, makes this position clear. Testing is a question on which the conventionally progressive and the conventionally academic often divide into warring camps. Seiser takes the question apart and finds that testing is of several kinds. Testing is inherent in effective teaching, he says, but when it is alienated from the teacher and turned into an instrument of classification and domination, it becomes something else.

Ted Seiser

Americans have this fetish of thinking that testing is something done by strangers. It's imposed or it's implied. The word ... that word that we use which I think is ... says it all, and we talk about testing instruments, like they're scalpels. Well, first of all, there is no test that I know that has any serious precision because of the difficulty of explaining the human mind. But the notion that there isn't a test unless it's administered flies in the face of all good teaching. We're constantly testing, constantly. You can't teach a kid without testing all the time, each one, one by one by one. And it gets to a point where, you know, I, the teacher, if I have some experience, I and my colleague teachers know the kids far better because of the endless testing every two minutes all year long than, you know, some test which is delivered in a bound box from outside and the number 2 pencils are handed out and the kids fill in the little bubbles. I mean, it's a joke the distance between what I know about the kid and what the world says about the kid on the basis of these tests.

David Cayley

So you (unclear) no use for, shall we call it, norm-based testing.

Ted Seiser

Relatively little use. You know, you find out some things. If the tests are tests of mastery rather than tests of how you're doing against everybody else, they're a bit more helpful. But we test kids in order to compare kids, in order to sort kids. The early 20th century American schools were set up to sort them. Who are the 20% who are deserving? But as soon as you say everybody's got to be deserving, the notion of public schools being a sorting system becomes obsolete. You can tell I'm all for testing all the time. Endless testing and public and sensitive and respectful of the differences. But question, question, question, question, question.

David Cayley

Testing is but one example of the way in which the medium of schooling becomes the message. External testing says you're here to be sorted and classified, whatever the motto over the door may say. Other structural features of schooling, from the architecture to the schedule of bells, convey related messages. If schools are to create thoughtful people, Seiser says, this quality has to be built in to the operations of the school and not just preached from its pulpit.

Ted Seiser

How do you organize a school so that in its very activity it models thoughtfulness? For example, I and my students are in a deep discussion of a Spanish novel and the principal of the school interrupts over the public address system to say will Jones and Smith please come to the office and the cheerleaders will meet after school in the parking lot. And it's profoundly thoughtless. It says to the kids the management of the school is much more important than Spanish. And all of us in schools, those who are responsible for them, have got to constantly say does this school practice the habits of thoughtfulness?

David Cayley

The changes Seiser is promoting, as he's already said, run against the grain of powerful habits and expectations. He says it's generally been easier to create new schools along the lines he favours than to change old ones. Schools recognized as catastrophes and therefore without much to lose have also provided fruitful ground for change. Where old schools have changed, they have often done it one piece at a time, converting, say, a quarter of the school to the new mode, then another quarter until finally there are four new smaller schools within the shell of the old one. Altogether, the difficulties of shaking up an entrenched system and creating what he earlier called "running room" makes him a strong proponent of choice in public schooling. Choice creates a pressure on existing institutions to change and over and above such practical considerations, he says, it's a right that ought to be extended to all Americans and not just to the better off.

Ted Seiser

The wealthier community says, well, I'm going to live in Town X because of its good schools. The whole real estate industry turns on choice made by people who can afford to move. Some people, myself for example, had government loans for mortgage loans. So we had ... we could choose our school district and, in fact, my wife and I moved from a city system to a suburban system when our oldest child went into ninth grade and we did it because we had more confidence in the school in the suburban area than in the city area. So Americans are all for choice. The question is should poor folks have choice, too? And I think they should. Why shouldn't they? Why should Mom and Dad, who happen, through whatever ... for whatever reasons, not to have the kind of income or the federal benefits that I had in my generation, why shouldn't they have the same education choice that I do? I'm all for choice. Furthermore, as a teacher I'd much rather teach kids who want to be in my class, who opt in, and as a high school principal, I would much rather have families that wanted my school than families who were forced to go to my school. So, let me cast it in a different way. The one major universal abridgement of the freedom of American citizens is called compulsory education. It is, in most states, between the ages of six and 17, children must attend school. It is a real abridgement of their freedom. And as a result of that quite understandable and I think sensible contradiction to the Bill of Rights, the hand of the state has to be very light and there should be choice, that I, the father, while accepting the notion that my child should attend school, should have the right to say I prefer this school over that school. Now, some people will say, oh, that leads to segregated schools. My response is they're already segregated today--segregated by social class. America's schools are the most segregated public schools in any industrialized nation. But at the same time, it is possible to give choice to families in a way that does not exacerbate the segregation by class and race which is very prevalent now in the country. So people ... people will say you can't have choice because it will segregate the schools. I say that's not necessarily the result.

David Cayley

Choice, for Seiser, is ultimately a moral imperative. Schooling now regulates access to good jobs more completely than ever before. Fairness, therefore, demands that students have equal chances at educational success. Opportunity, Seiser says, is what the Coalition of Essential Schools is finally all about.

Ted Seiser

The extent to which school systems track, that is, you will go to college and I won't, is the extent to which both you give up on people and, secondly, you play God. I, the teacher, know that because you're Hispanic you really shouldn't try to get into the California Institute of Technology. The evidence is that well-taught kids from every quarter can shoot into careers that none of us would

have imagined for them. So there's a ... it's a profoundly moral thing that every kid should be given the maximum feasible number of doors to open by the time he or she is 17 or 18. And that has nothing to do with global competition. It has to do with simple human decency. It has to do with using our talent well. It's a democratic ideal. So underneath it all is a philosophical commitment which sometimes is too rarely heard in American conversation.

(Music)

Lister Sinclair

On Ideas tonight, you heard Part 4 of The Education Debates, by David Cayley. Our series continues tomorrow night with a program about why primary school students can't read and why college students can't write. A complete schedule of the series is available on the CBC website. Go to www.radio.cbc.ca and look for Ideas.